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Section
Three

Specialized Skills

Chapter 8

5-String Fundamentals

Even though Tony Levin says three is enough, the 5-string bass has earned a place in many players' arsenals. Normally tuned *BEADG*, the 5's increased range, additional positions, and expanded timbral variety open up possibilities unknown to 4-stringers. And as the 5-string's design has matured, it's becoming easier to jump into low-*B* land. Manufacturers have figured out how to make great-sounding 5-strings in almost every price range.

Tech Talk

Debuting in the mid '70s, the first 5-strings varied greatly in neck width. Some builders squeezed five strings into the space of four, while others kept standard P-Bass spacing all the way across. This extreme range made it difficult for hardware manufacturers to establish standards; many early 5-string bridges featured movable saddles to accommodate constantly changing specs. "About ten years ago my first 5-strings were Jazz Bass-style: 21 frets, 1¾" at the nut, 2⅞" at the last fret," recalls New York luthier Roger Sadowsky. "Players wanted 24 frets and wider spacing, so we went with 1⅞" at the nut and 3 1/16" at the 24th fret. With a 24-fret neck we had to move the pickups closer to the bridge to leave room for slapping, so we needed bigger-sounding pickups to compensate for the loss of bottom."

The 5's string spacing has now settled into two main varieties: The wider has 3/4" spacing at the bridge, which provides more room for slapping. The narrower has 5/8" spacing, which allows faster string crossing, makes chordal playing easier, and keeps the neck width narrower overall. In some basses the string spacing is narrow at the nut but flares out significantly toward the bridge, combining a more playable lower-fret feel with more room for slapping.

The biggest challenge is building a 5 with a good-sounding *B* string. To combat flabby *B* syndrome, some companies offer 35" and even 36" scales instead of the more common 34". But while the extra length bolsters the *B*, not all players are comfortable with the longer scale.

Another method of increasing B-string clarity is to run the strings through the body, which can add up to 1 1/2" of string length without changing the playing scale. Neck stability also affects *B*-string tone; a number of builders use graphite to add stiffness. Perhaps the most radical approach to B-string tension appears on the Dingwall Voodoo bass. Its Ralph Novak-designed fanned-fret fingerboard yields scale measurements from 34" on the *G* string to 37" on the *B*.

Of course, there are plenty of 34"-scale basses that achieve well-defined *B*'s through careful attention to body and neck woods, bridge density, string down-force at the bridge saddle, neck-joint solidity, and overall craftsmanship.

Strings

Strings play a major role in determining whether your axe has the crystal-clear lows of a Steinway grand or the murky overtones of a large steel drum. Indeed, the search for a better *B* has spurred big string-technology improvements in the past ten years. *B* gauges now range from .115 to a whopping .145, with .125 to .130 standard for 5-string sets. But, notes La Bella's Bob Archigian, "There's more to strings than the diameter. Different cores, windings, and tapering all can produce a different character."

Bassists remain sharply divided on whether a tapered *B* string sounds best. The narrower over-the-saddle gauge can make the tapered *B* easier to intonate and give it better sustain. But in BASS PLAYER's March '96 String Shootout, editors found they preferred the sound of conventional strings, perhaps because the increased mass at the bridge produces more body resonance. If you switch from conventional strings, make sure you raise your *B*-string saddle to compensate for the taper.

Searching for a *B* string that works with your bass can be expensive. Fortunately, many companies have done extensive research into which strings bring out the best in their basses, so check with your instrument's manufacturer for recommendations.

Let's Shop

When trying out 5-strings, listen closely to the lower notes' tone. Slap a few notes from low *B* to low *D*. Is the sound clear or muddy? Play all the way up the neck on the *B* string. Is the timbre consistent? Check string tension. Does the *B* feel tight, or does it flap when you lay into it? Check the neck. Does it feel too wide? A 5-string neck can increase hand strain, so comfort is important. It takes time to adjust to a 5-string's extra width, but sometimes you can tell right away if a particular 5 is going to work for you.

Neck contour also affects feel; a wide neck with a fat, round contour is too much for some players. There are lots of neck options, though, including asymmetrical profiles that put more wood under the *B* string than under the *G*.

Check the bass's sonic balance by playing across the strings. If you notice a marked drop in *B*-string volume, check the pickup's magnet placement by testing it with a ferrous object such as a paper clip. If the magnet doesn't extend far enough under the *B* string, the sound won't be balanced. Fortunately there are many choices available for 5-string pickups, with the J-Bass and "soapbar" styles well represented. If you find an axe has the right feel but a less-than-ideal sound, you may be able to improve it.

For more information about choosing a 5, see BASS PLAYER's January '97 Ultimate 5-String Shootout (**www.bassplayer.com/gear**).

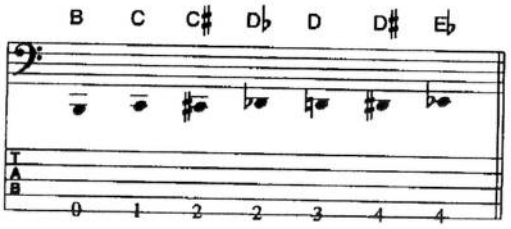
Plugging In

When you finally get your 5-string, take it easy at first. Your hands need to adjust to the wider neck, and you'll likely feel additional stress about hitting wrong notes. On your initial gigs carry your 4 as a backup in case your hands, brain, and bandmates need a break.

One detail you must address is the need for additional muting. When playing the *A*, *D*, and *G* strings, free-ringing open *B* and *E* strings can be a problem. Start with your thumb on the pickup when playing the *B* and *E* strings. When you move across to the *A* string, dropping your thumb to the *B* will keep it quiet, and your upstroke will mute the *E* when your finger comes to rest against it. When switching to the *D* string, drop your thumb to the *E* and let it cover the *B* as well; this keeps these two muted. Playing the *G* string requires you to leave the thumb notched between the *B* and *E*—while you also use your 3rd finger to cover the *A* string. This takes some *getting used to, but it's essential to developing clean right-hand technique. (Just be* glad you're not playing a 6-string yet.)

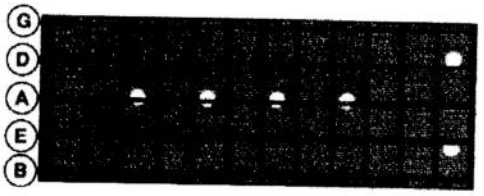
Not having *E* as your lowest string requires mental adjustment, and it will be tempting to overuse the extra low notes. Sure, they sound great, but they also carry a lot of weight. The great 5-string players use the lower range sparingly, deliberately, and *musically*. Listen for *B*-string notes on recordings to learn how the best bassists employ them for emphasis and drama. Ex. 1 shows where those tones sit on the staff.

Ex. 1



One of the 5-string's biggest advantages is additional positions—you now have two places to play low *E* through low *A♭* (Fig. 1). This lets you stay in one position longer, make bigger jumps with less effort, and explore new timbral possibilities. Playing above the 5th fret on the *B* string—instead of stretching for notes on the *E*—also gives your arm and hand a break.

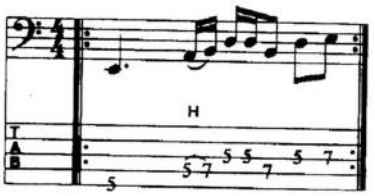
Fig. 1

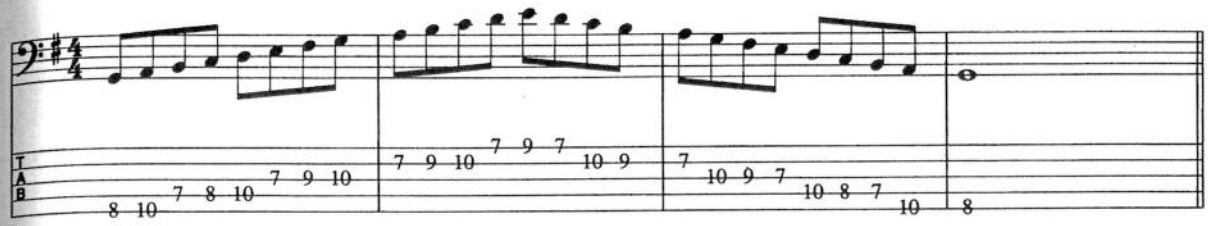


The first four times through Ex. 2, play the way you would on 4-string—using an open *E*—and then transfer that note to the *B* string's 5th fret for the last four times. The line will feel and sound different, with more depth and a darker timbre to the *E*. Ex. 3 shows how you can use the *B* string to play an extended *G* major scale in one position; Ex. 4 does the same (except for a final one-fret stretch) with diatonic 7th chords in *G*. Ex. 5 shows a simple arpeggiated bass line over a I–IV–V progression that uses all five strings in one position. Ex. 6 is a finger-funk line that drops to low *D* in the last bar for emphasis. It's also cool to lay into the low *B* string. Ex. 7 is a 3/4 slap line that emphasizes the low *D*. Slapping this low will give you a clear indication how good your *B* string really is.

As you work with your 5, more possibilities will reveal themselves, and you'll find that in many ways it's a different instrument than the 4. Once your hands adapt and your brain adjusts, you may discover you feel naked without your *B* string.

Ex. 2





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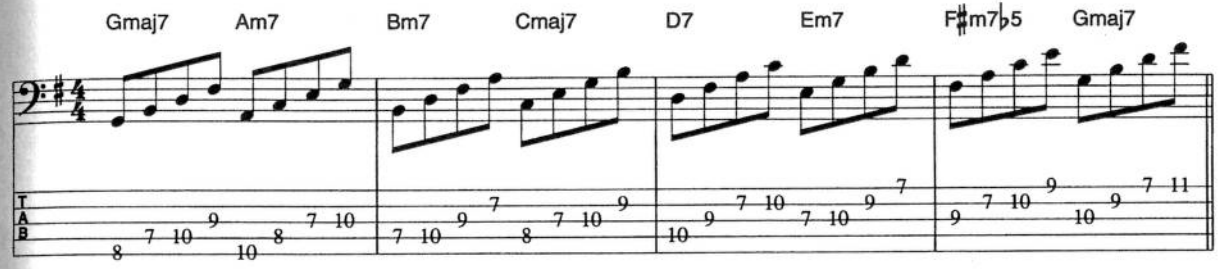

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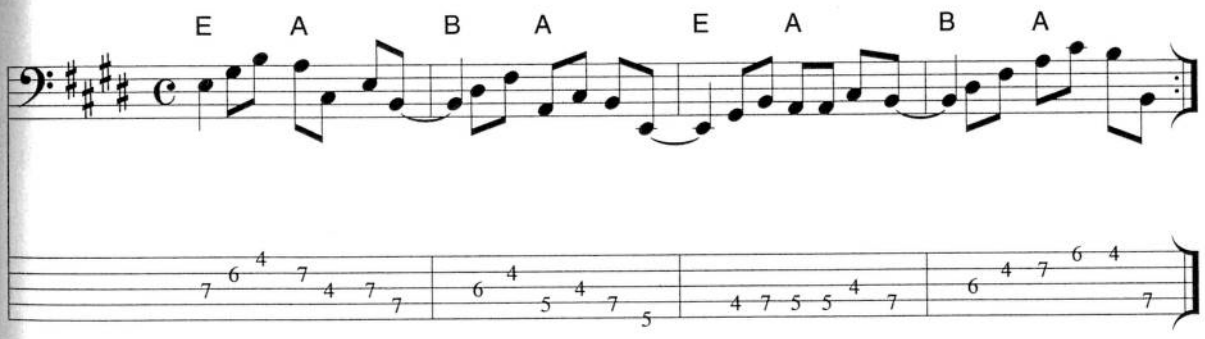
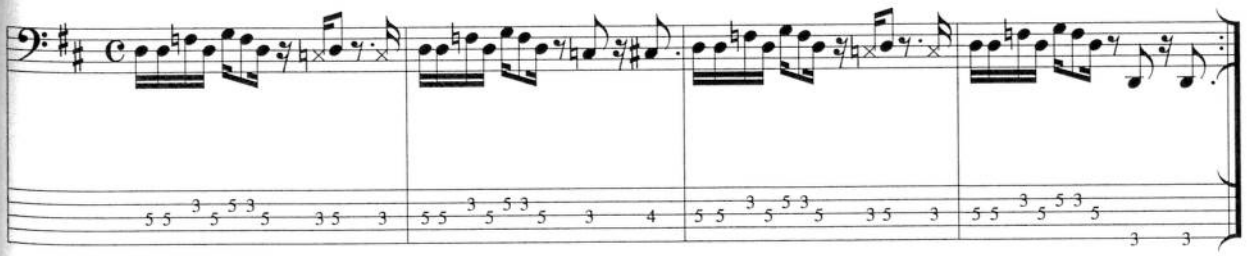


Ex. 5



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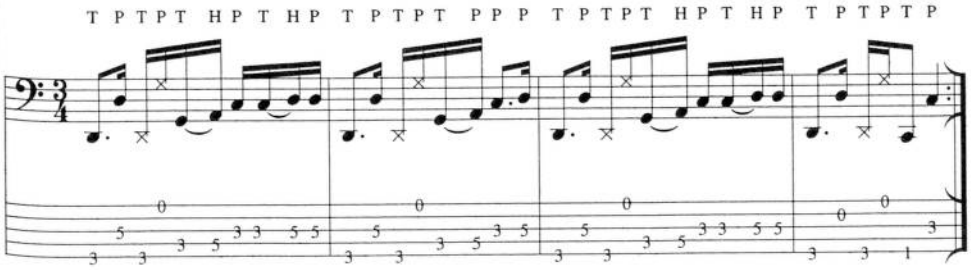


Ex. 7

Chapter 9

Doubling

When Leo Fender introduced the Precision Bass in 1951, he gave bassists a viable choice between electric and acoustic. Each instrument has its devotees. For decades, hard-core electrophiles have debated with acoustic purists over which instrument is the "real" bass. But many of us have chosen to sidestep this argument by playing both.

"Doubling" opens up two categories of work. You can take gigs on the other bass, and many gigs go exclusively to doublers. Plus, you gain the opportunity to express yourself in a wider range of musical situations, and you can learn the unique beauty of each bass. Here's information you'll need to become a doubler, coming from either direction.

Moving from Electric to Acoustic

Acoustic basses can be intimidating. They're big, expensive, sometimes hard to find, and have a 41" to 43" string lengths (with no frets), and they take years to master. Faced with those challenges, many electric bassists stick with what they know. But if the upright's challenges scare you away, you'll never know the joy of playing a booming low F and hearing the note swell and sustain for as long as you can keep your finger down. No fretless electric can match the growl of a well-set-up acoustic upright. Feeling the vibrations in the huge body, the subtleties of tone, and the pure acoustic sound of your hands working with the instrument is an incredible experience. Yes, it's a lot of work, and it requires dedication, patience, and some cash to get started—but your travails will be well rewarded the day you are good enough to gig on acoustic.

Finding a bass. First, you have to get an instrument. If you live near a major metropolitan area, you'll have more choices. Look in the Yellow Pages for stringed-instrument shops. You may find a bass in a regular music store; call around. Check the newspaper's used-instrument listings. Pawnshops are another option. And ask other bassists. If there is a symphony orchestra where you live, contact the bassists and see if they have anything for sale or know someone who does. There are several

shops around the country that cater to acoustic bassists, stocking a good selection of instruments. Their inventory will be higher quality—and higher priced. There are also mail order houses that stock new factory-made basses, both plywood and carved. These instruments' quality can vary greatly. Inquire about the instrument's origin. Some brands have been around awhile and can be trusted, but a bass with a German-sounding name might come from Sri Lanka.

Be prepared to spend a minimum of $1,000 for a plywood bass. The days of finding an old Kay for $300 are gone—unless you are *really* lucky. A plywood bass is fine to start with; they are less expensive than carved instruments, and if set up well can sound excellent. Carved basses are pricier, more prone to cracking, and more expensive to maintain. If you luck into a decent carved bass for a reasonable price, go for it; you can always get your money back if you decide to sell it.

There are many crossover-style instruments on the market. Some of them approximate the feel of a real upright, while others are designed to help the electric player make an easy transition to upright-style playing with a shorter string length. While these basses have their merits, don't mistake them for the real thing. Someone who learns on a short-scale solidbody electric upright wouldn't last for one tune on a regular acoustic upright. If you think using one of these instruments will make you an upright player, think again.

If you have a friend who plays upright, bring him or her along to check out the instrument you're considering. Keep in mind it may need work, and it may be hard for you to tell if the bass is a diamond in the rough, or just rough. Some signs indicate major problems; others are less serious, requiring only routine repairs. (For more detailed information, read "How to Buy & Care for an Acoustic Bass" in the March '95 BASS PLAYER.)

Warning signs. When you first look at a bass, notice the string height. Are the strings a mile off the fingerboard? This could be simply a matter of setup. Check where the neck joins the body. Are there any signs of a repair job? A poorly refit neck joint can make an instrument very difficult to get into playing shape. If the job was done right, though, it won't affect playability. Look at the top, particularly around the bridge feet. Basses can develop dips or bumps if the soundpost has been too tight. Also look for soundpost-related cracks along the back. Examine the fingerboard—is there a lot of wood left on it, or has it been planed down to a sliver? Check the seam where the fingerboard is glued to the neck. Is it glued on straight and securely? Look down the fingerboard to see if there are high spots that need planing. Check for open seams by rapping along the edges of the bass with a knuckle. Seams are easy to fix—

but if they're open, you won't get a full sense of how the bass sounds. Finally, play the bass and check for rattles. The bass bar is an important component. It's a long wooden strip that is glued to the top under the *E* string bridge foot and runs the length of the top. The bass bar transmits vibrations to the top and gives the instrument stability. If it's loose, it may rattle or let the top sink in from the tension—and most certainly affect the sound. Repairing it means taking off the top, which can cost around $300. Make sure you have your friend play the bass, and listen to how it sounds from a variety of positions.

Strings. Once you've found something that's affordable and looks solid, most likely you'll need new strings. Upright strings are relatively expensive; do some research before you buy. First, determine what type of playing you'll do. There are strings that suit classical playing, but if you want to play jazz, you'll need strings that work well for pizzicato (plucking). Fortunately, many manufacturers label their strings accordingly. If you are into bluegrass or blues, you may want gut or nylon strings to get a more authentic sound. There are also newer strings that claim to be good all-around choices. (BASS PLAYER's March '96 article "Searching for the Perfect Upright Strings" is an excellent source of information.

The bridge. Now that you have your strings, look at the bridge. Height adjusters—wheels that allow you to raise and lower the bridge—are very important. Does your bridge have them? When you first start out, you'll want to keep the strings lower to save your hands; there's no glory in wrestling a bass with 3" action when you're beginning. As you get stronger, you may want to raise the action to make the bass louder. If your bass doesn't have height adjusters, have them installed by a good acoustic-bass technician. If the wheels can be fitted to your existing bridge, it will cost $100 to $150. If you need to get a new bridge cut, it can run you between $200 and $300. (Of course, prices will vary.) If you can't find a good repairperson, be willing to travel—or take your chances with someone at a guitar shop. Once you get the strings on and lowered to a reasonable height, you may discover the fingerboard has some buzzes. Getting the fingerboard professionally "dressed" can make a huge difference in how a bass sounds and feels.

The bow. Did you remember to buy a bow? You soon-to-be upright jazzers will need one. It's the best way to tune the bass, and, most important, it's the most effective way to learn how to play in tune. Pizzicato playing allows a high margin of error; the bow, however, is a merciless microscope that will painfully pinpoint your intonation flaws. It may be hard to listen to at first, but deal with it. The pain will pay off later.

You have the choice between a French or German bow (Fig. 1). There are advantages to both: The French bow is held overhand, like a violin bow; it has the potential for better articulation and easier string crossing. The German bow is held underhand, giving you greater power and volume, and in my opinion is easier to learn. A good bow can cost more than a bass, but you can buy a fiberglass bow with real hair (not synthetic) for around $50. That's good enough for now.

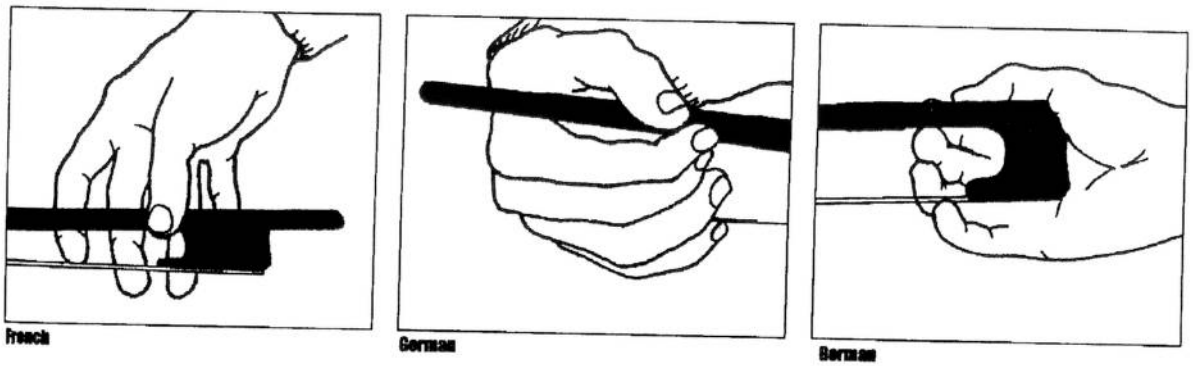


Fig.1

You'll need rosin for your bow—it's near impossible for the bow hair to grip the strings without it. Get rosin made specifically for bass; violin and cello rosin isn't sticky enough, Carlsson Swedish Bass Rosin and Pop's are two brands pro players favor. If you live in a warm climate make sure you keep the rosin in its plastic container in a cool place. Heat will make rosin soft and runny, and you may wind up with a formless blob the texture of thick honey.

Technique. At this point you'll need to find a teacher to help you progress faster and avoid technical pitfalls that could develop into physical problems. Upright bass is a physically demanding instrument, and an inefficient approach could set you back. Ask around for a referral to a teacher who plays the style you like—but make sure the teacher can teach you to use the bow. Someone who says you don't need to learn bowing is steering you down the road to bad intonation. Every teacher has preferences for books, but you should get into one of the time-tested classical methods. The three big names to look for are Nanny, Simandl, and Billè; these methods will help with scales, arpeggios, string crossing, and neck positions.

New acoustic players' most common technical mistake is using electric-bass technique. It's important to know the differences between one-finger-per-fret electric technique and traditional acoustic technique. Because of the upright's long string length and the extra hand strength required, most acoustic players mainly use only three fingerboard-hand fingers—the index, middle, and ring finger and pinkie together. This is

called the Simandl method. If you start out trying to use one finger per semitone on an upright fingerboard, you're asking for physical problems in your hand and arm.

There are differences in plucking-hand technique, too. Your plucking fingers' pads won't be tough enough to withstand the torture an upright bass can dish out—you could end up with blisters that take weeks to heal. Use the side of your index finger from the middle knuckle down; the skin is tougher there, and you'll get a fatter sound. (For your public acoustic-upright debut, bring your electric bass. You may not have the stamina to last a whole night on upright.)

Playing out. Once you've been studying and practicing for a while, your hands will be stronger, you'll have applied some of your musical knowledge to the instrument, and you'll be ready to jam. First, think about what you're going to do. Are you playing with a bunch of acoustic guitars or a piano? No amp is needed. But add a drummer, and you need an amp. Otherwise, you won't be heard, and you'll burn out your hands trying. You've probably heard stories of the "good old days" when "real" bassists played seven-hour big band gigs without an amp and were heard just fine. Those days are gone. Drummers play louder, horn players use microphones, guitarist are always amplified, keyboards are often electric. If you want to use gut strings with super-high action only to be "felt" and not heard, be prepared to suffer.

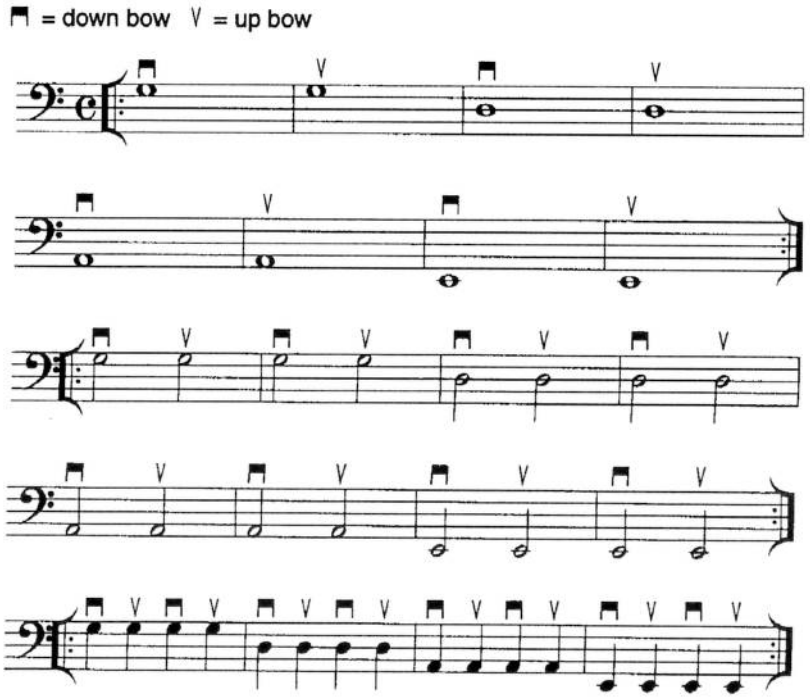
Pickups & amps. There are many options for amplifying upright. Depending on how loud you need to be, you have the choice of a transducer pickup, a microphone, a combination (my preference), or—if you really have to crank it up—a magnetic pickup. (For more on these options, check out "Electric Wood: Acoustic Upright Amplification Basics" in the October '98 BASS PLAYER (**www.bassplayer.com/gear**). Many piezo pickups require a buffer preamp. That's because the piezo pickup's output impedance is hotter than most amps' input impedance, so the pickup "loads" the input, causing reduced low-frequency response. When buying a pickup, find out if it needs a preamp—most manufacturers make preamps that match their pickups.

Next you'll need an amp. Chances are your upright isn't going to sound good through your SVT. A small sealed cabinet works best for the upright; standing in front of a huge cab is an invitation to feedback, not to mention a woofy, indistinct sound. A 12" speaker is just fine for acoustic bass; a 15" works great, and some 2x10 cabinets work well, too. If you are trying to compete in a full-volume blues band, you may need to go through the PA. I've never had much luck with the upright at super-high volumes. It can be done, but don't let go of the strings for a second, or you'll hear the worst gut-rattling, speaker-blowing feedback of your life.

After a while, your hands will be strong, your intonation will be accurate, you'll learn how to get the right sound for the gig, and you'll feel a tremendous sense of accomplishment. And when word gets out that you play upright, your phone will be ringing with all sorts of new opportunities.

Upright Exercises

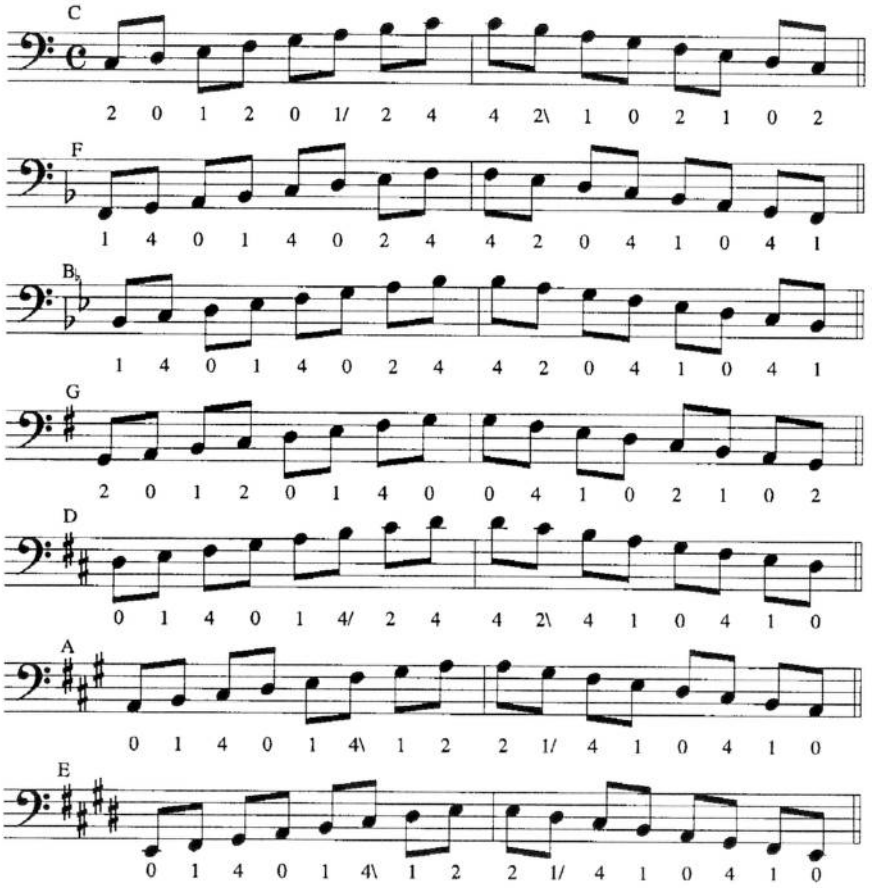
To get started on the bow, play long tones along with a metronome. Start with open strings to get a feel for your bowing hand (Ex. 1). Good tone requires learning to control bow speed and pressure on the strings. Each string responds differently; the *G* and *D* will speak without too much effort, but the *A* and *E* are a little harder to get moving. As you play closer to the bow's tip, you'll need to add a little pressure because your hand weight will be at its farthest from the string. Focus on smooth, consistent movement—picture your bow arm moving in a circle as you change from down bow (your arm moving away from your body) to up bow (your arm moving toward your body). See how refined you can make it sound—you don't want to saw the bass in half.



Ex. 1

Next, practice one-octave major scales. Follow the recommended fingerings; they are your key to good intonation. Ex. 2 shows fingerings for the most common major keys. Fingering numbers that are followed by a forward slash (/) indicate a shift to a higher position, and numbers followed by a backward slash (\) indicate a shift to a lower position. Pay attention to your sound. Are you close to being in tune? If you have a keyboard available, make a tape of the major scales to practice with (use a straight piano sound). Match your pitch with the keyboard's. Is your volume consistent? How is your tone? The acoustic bass requires you to become a good listener.

Ex. 2



Moving from Acoustic to Electric

First, rid yourself of any attitude of superiority, and approach the electric bass with dignity and humility. (If you think it's a toy, listen to Victor Wooten.) When you experience the sheer power of one open *E* whole-note played through a high-powered stack, you'll see what the instrument has in store.

Getting a bass. You're lucky—electric basses are easy to find and can be inexpensive. Just about every music store has a selection, and you can find good used deals. Be prepared to spend between $300 and $500 for a decent starter electric; you can find them for cheaper, but quality suffers in the low range. Ask around and try several models. I recommend starting out with a 4-string—it will feel more familiar than a 5 or 6. You may be tempted to go for a fretless. Sure, you'll be able to transfer *some* of your left-hand technique, but remember most electrics have a 34" scale length, as opposed to acoustic's 40"-plus. I suggest starting with a fretted bass.

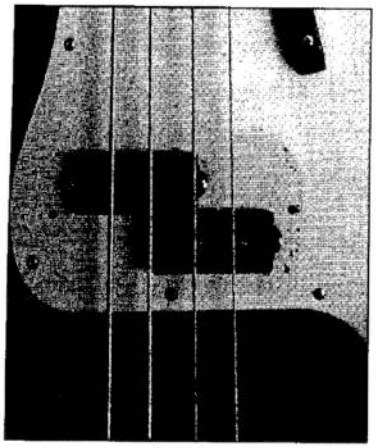
Check the neck width at the nut. The narrow "Jazz" neck (named after the Fender Jazz Bass) is 1 1/2" at the nut, while the slightly wider "Precision" neck (named after the Fender Precision) is 1 3/4" at the nut. You'll also find 1⅝" necks. Try each.

Pickups. Electric basses also have a variety of pickup configurations (Fig. 2). The Jazz Bass setup consists of two single-coil pickups—one near the bridge and one near the fingerboard. This system is preferred for thumbstyle (slap-and-pop) and for jazz playing—the pickup placement gives you more highs and better articulation for faster playing. A disadvantage of this system is the hum that occurs when both pickup volumes aren't turned up full. Some basses have internal shielding to lessen this problem; you'll notice the difference when you're trying out different basses.

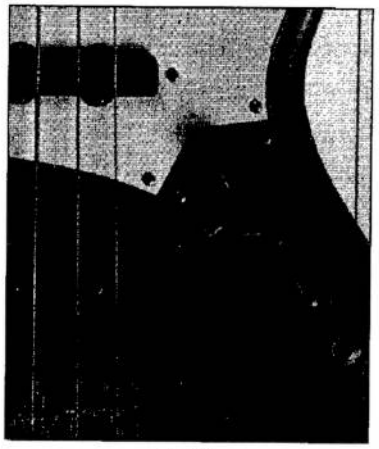
The Precision setup consists of one split pickup in the middle of the pickguard; this gives you a strong, punchy tone with a deep bottom and less highs. It's good for fat, round bass sounds, which work well in blues, rock, country, and reggae. Precision-type basses can be used for funk and jazz as well; it's a matter of preference. You will also see the "PJ" setup, which consists of a Precision-style pickup in front and a Jazz-style pickup at the bridge. This can offer a good compromise in the quest for big bottom and clear highs.

Many companies offer their own pickup designs. A common type is the "soapbar," named because of its rectangular shape. Different soapbars often look identical, though inside they might be P-style, J-style, or "humbucker." Humbucker pickups have two coils that cancel out each other's hum. They are quiet, generally louder, and tend to offer fewer high frequencies than single-coil pickups. There are also hum-

buckers that look like single-coil Jazz bass pickups, so ask to make sure you know what you're buying.



P-style



J-style

PJ-style

Fig. 2

Basses can be passive or active. Passive basses rely only on the strings and pickups to create the sound. Active basses have a built-in preamp circuit that can boost volume and tone. Some active setups allow you to boost or cut lows and highs, and some have an additional midrange control. These choices are a matter of taste. Some players like the active controls' flexibility, while other prefer passive basses' simplicity. Try out both—and remember, a passive bass can always be upgraded with an active tone circuit.

Amps. If you already have an upright-bass amp, you can use that to practice with or to play small gigs. Just remember: If you have something small like a Polytone Mini-Brute, there's only so much it can take; these amps are not designed to pump out heavy electric bass. When you get next to a drummer, you'll be pushing the amp and risking a blown speaker or circuit.

There are many good medium-size combo amps (amp and speaker in one enclosure). Look for something that has either a 15" speaker, two 10" speakers, or four 10" speakers, and a minimum of 200 watts. Low frequencies require lots of power, so the more you have, the cleaner your sound. Many new amp designs include a tweeter for reproducing the highs, which is good if you want to get into slap bass. Another option is to get a separate speaker cabinet and a "head"—a combined preamp and power amp. This setup has one big advantage: you can mix and match components for the best sound and convenience. If you're playing a small gig you can bring a

2x10 cab, and if it's a heavy rock gig you can bring a 1x15 plus a 4x10 for maximum volume. Combos are generally less expensive than separate head/cabinet systems, and they're easier to transport. Find something that suits your needs—and your checkbook.

Strings. Most electric bassists use roundwound strings; they sound brighter, which makes them better suited for funk and harder-edged rock. Roundwounds come in stainless-steel and nickel. Stainless-steel strings are brighter-sounding and last longer—but since the metal is harder, it increases fret wear. Nickel strings don't sound quite as bright and go dead sooner, but some people prefer their sound. The standard gauges are (*G* string to *E*): .045, .065, .085, .105. Some electric players use lighter-gauge strings, but the heavier standard gauge will likely feel better to you. Flatwound strings are making a comeback; they have a mellower sound, produce less string noise, and feel more familiar to upright players. Flatwounds can be a good choice if you don't intend to play slap-style.

Technique. Find a teacher. There are many fine points to electric bass playing, and you'll be able to deal with the technical and conceptual differences most effectively if you have someone to guide you. For instance, if you are a classical player making the switch, you'll have to learn a whole new approach to pizzicato. But if you do choose to go it alone, there are many good books and videos available.

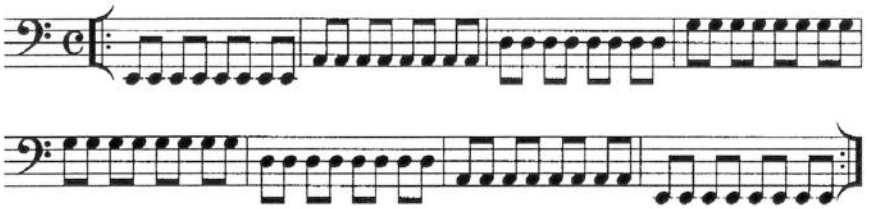
Physically, making the transition from upright to electric is easier, because your hands are used to playing something much more difficult. Unfortunately, this can cause a problem: You may tend to overplay. While it may be fun to let your fingers fly, remember that you still have to be supportive; overplaying will not endear you to your fellow musicians. On upright, the string response is slower, because the strings are longer, and the sound goes through the bridge and the soundpost and gets dispersed throughout the top and back. By the time the note has fully formed, it has traveled some distance. Electric bass attack is much faster; when you play the note, it's *right there*. This means you'll have to adjust your sense of time a bit—otherwise, you may rush.

Electric's full, punchy sound takes up a lot of sonic space, so economy is extremely important. If you listen to Jaco Pastorius or James Jamerson, you will hear them playing a lot. However, pay attention to *how* they play—it's not just the number of notes, it's how and when they play them. To get a really good sense of how the electric bass works, listen to the many ways it gets used in a variety of styles.

Electric Exercises

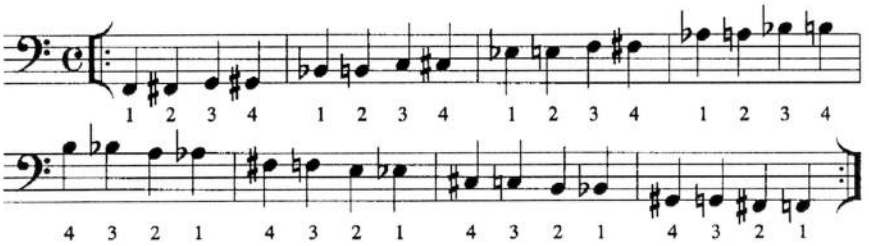
To get used to electric bass's attack, set your metronome at a medium tempo and play steady eighth-notes (Ex. 3). A common approach to playing rock bass, this is also a good way to develop consistent tone, volume, and rhythm.

Ex. 3



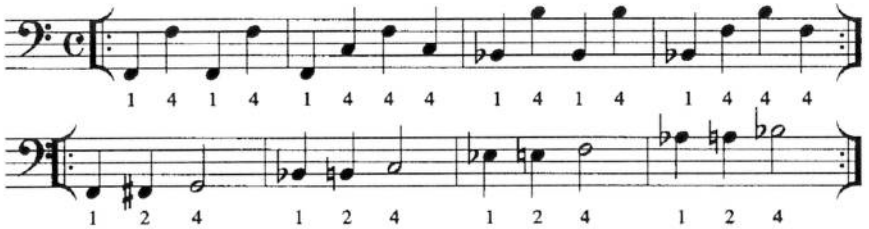
There are three systems of electric bass fingering. The first uses one finger per fret (Ex. 4). This method gives you the left-hand flexibility to execute difficult passages. Never stretch your hand too much, though; use a slight pivot between your 2nd and 3rd fingers.

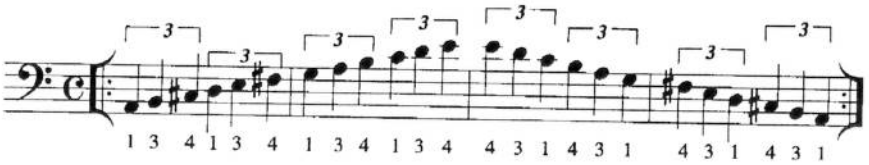
Ex. 4



The second method is similar to upright fingering (Ex. 5). For playing octaves and 5ths, use your 1st finger on the root and the 4th finger on the 5th and octave. This eliminates the hand stress caused by stretching across one or more strings. This is often called "box" fingering. In the lower positions, it may be easier to use the 1-2-4 fingering for half-steps.

Ex. 5





Ex. 6

The third approach is extension fingering. By keeping the wrist low and the hand open, you can stretch across more frets and play whole-steps between the fingers 1-3-4 (Ex. 6). This can help you avoid the unwanted string noise position shifts cause. It also opens up new musical opportunities—just make sure you don't strain your left hand. Just as you do with acoustic bass, always warm up on electric—slow scales work well.

Gig Tips

If you have to double on a gig, consider bringing two amps. I have yet to find a rig that sounds equally good for electric and acoustic; the sonic requirements are too different. For upright you need a tight, focused sound with the EQ voiced for piezo pickups. Electric bass needs lots of power and a speaker cabinet that moves some air. For doubling gigs I bring a small but effective electric rig: a 300-watt head and a ported 2x10 cabinet. I put my little acoustic-bass combo on top of that. It's a lot to carry—but if you want to sound your best on both instruments, you need to have the right equipment. Some people have success playing upright and electric through a small 2x10 cabinet with separate preamps. Bear in mind, though, that an amp designed for electric bass may not have the best EQ for upright. There's another disadvantage to running both basses through the same rig: when you switch instruments, you will definitely need to change your EQ and volume settings. This takes time, and you may not get the settings right. Having a dedicated amp for each allows you to dial in the sound and leave it, allowing for smoother transitions. If you do run both basses into the same amp, use an A/B switching device so you don't have to do any unplugging.

Make sure you have enough room to safely put down your acoustic bass; you may have to make a quick transition, and you don't want to damage it. If you can, find a corner to stand the upright in. Remember to protect the bridge; a slight knock can ruin your setup. You may want to invest in an acoustic stand. Have a stand for your electric bass as well, and keep your cords arranged neatly.

If your band uses a set list, talk to the leader about programming the set for minimal bass changes—switching every other tune is a big hassle. If you are playing in a

Double Talk

Here's what three well-known doublers have to say about playing both acoustic and electric bass.

John Patitucci

For the last several years I've gotten back into my classical playing, and it's helped my overall playing a lot. Switching back and forth is tricky; my way has always been just to play both a lot. I've had to keep my mind open enough to switch back and forth, because a lot of it is mental.

It's always been a little juggling act for me to keep them both going. With my workload now, it's not always possible to play both basses every day, but recently I started getting up early every morning and practicing for an hour with the bow. One of the big differences between the electric and acoustic has to do with the left hand. On the electric, we're always striving for total independence of each finger, except down low, where I use the 1st and 4th fingers for whole-steps. On acoustic, if you play the traditional way, the 1st and 2nd fingers are independent, with the 3rd and 4th always together.

Bunny Brunel

I started on the acoustic, but only a week later I started doubling on the electric bass. In fact, one of the reasons I got the gig with Chick Corea in 1978 was because I could play all of the electric bass material from *Return to Forever* [ECM] as well as the acoustic bass work from *Friends* [Polydor]. The electric bass helped me figure out where the notes are on the acoustic. To maintain a high level of performance on the two instruments, you just have to practice both all of the time. I use electric bass technique on both instruments [using all four fingers, even in the 1st position].

Reggie Hamilton

I've always felt they are two different instruments, and there were just as many challenges on electric as on acoustic. They both require a lot of attention. On electric you need to practice harmonics, scales, slapping, and playing with the pick. On upright, someone may ask you to sound like Jimmy Blanton, Oscar Pettiford, or Tommy Potter. You need to know both instruments' history. As far as bowing is concerned, practice, practice, practice—there are no two ways about it. If you practice with the bow all the time, your pizzicato intonation will just get better.

On show gigs where I'm doubling I don't always have time to make the segue, so I just sling my electric behind my back and pick up the upright—I have strap locks on all my electrics.

pit orchestra, you may have to change frequently. A good arranger knows it takes a while to switch basses and will write in enough time for you to make the transition. In a fast-paced variety show, you may have to change instruments quickly. With cramped quarters and an inefficient setup, switching basses can be a real challenge, so check the music and see where your switches are. If necessary, practice your transitions with a metronome clicking the tempo and see if you have enough time—you can't afford to miss your cue. Use your A/B switch or a volume pedal to make switches quietly.

Resources

Here are some books on core skills and different styles for electric and upright; **www.bassbooks.com** and **www.lemurmusic.com** are good online sources.

Electric

Bass Essentials, Bunny Brunel [Mel Bay]

Bass Fitness, Josquin Des Pres [Hal Leonard]

Funk Bass, Jon Liebman [Hal Leonard]

Funkifying the Clave: Afro-Cuban Grooves for Bass, Lincoln Goines & Robbie Ameen [Warner Bros.]

The Funkmasters: The Great James Brown Rhythm Sections, Dr. Licks & Chuck Silverman [Warner Bros.]

Reggae Bass, Ed Friedland [Hal Leonard]

Standing in the Shadows of Motown: The Life & Music of Legendary Bassist James Jamerson, Dr. Licks [Hal Leonard]

The True Cuban Bass, Carlos D'l Puerto & Silvio Vergara [Sher]

Upright

The Evolving Bassist Millennium Edition, Rufus Reid [Myriad]

Jazz Bass; Building Walking Bass Lines; Expanding Walking Bass Lines; Bass Improvisation; Ed Friedland [Hal Leonard]

Melodic Playing in the Thumb Position, Michael Moore [Advance]

Methode Complete pour la Contrebasse, Edouard Nanny [Leduc]

New Method for Double Bass, T. Simandl [Carl Fischer]

Nuovo Metodo per Contrabbasso, Isaia Billè [G. Ricordi]

The instruments' physical differences cease to be an obstacle once you've spent some time with both. Until that happens, stay as relaxed as possible. Remember to make the micro-adjustments in your right-hand attack so you don't rush or drag. Doubling will improve your playing on your primary bass, and you'll find ways to incorporate your new musical perspectives and open up new paths of expression.

Chapter 10

The Thumb Thing: How to Get an Upright Sound on Electric Bass

These days when somebody mentions playing with the thumb, the first thing that comes to mind is slapping. But don't forget that the bass guitar was originally designed to be plucked with a downward thumb motion. Ever notice the finger rest below the *G* string on P-Basses? It's there so you can rest your index, middle, and ring fingers while you play with your thumb. To keep the strings from ringing when they weren't supposed to, Fender glued a foam strip to the underside of the bridge cover (a favorite ashtray for '70s bassists). This muted the strings, resulting in a short note-decay time that approximated upright bass sound.

In Dr. Licks' James Jamerson tribute *Standing in the Shadows of Motown: The Life & Music of Legendary Bassist James Jamerson* [Hal Leonard], look at the photos of the artists who played on the accompanying CD. You'll see some of them shoved foam strips under their strings at the bridge to help them simulate the old Motown sound. (Jamerson used the original bridge-plate mute and flatwound strings.) After the book came out, players started sticking foam under their strings in an attempt to get Jamerson's sound. (If only it were that simple!) This makes an effective mute—but getting a piece of foam in and out between tunes can be a problem. You can achieve similar results by muting the strings with your right-hand palm. This technique creates some different articulation possibilities, giving you greater control over your sound. Thumb-and-mute is one of the most useful techniques I have—and on some gigs, it's the only way I play.

The right-hand muting technique helps you simulate several styles:

- The upright-bass sound from early jazz, R&B, country, and rock & roll records. (Most of this article will deal with this application.)

- Certain synth-bass sounds you hear on modern R&B and rap records.
- The deep bass sound of salsa and reggae.

In addition, in some rooms it's the only way to get a decent sound. In very boomy halls, a sustained note fills up so much space it's impossible to hear or feel what you're playing. Muting keeps the notes short and gives you a nice, solid attack. And it sure beats cutting the lows and boosting the mids!

How To Do It

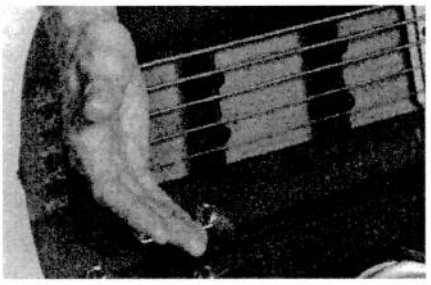


Fig. 1

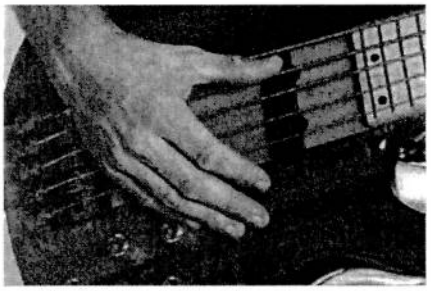


Fig. 2

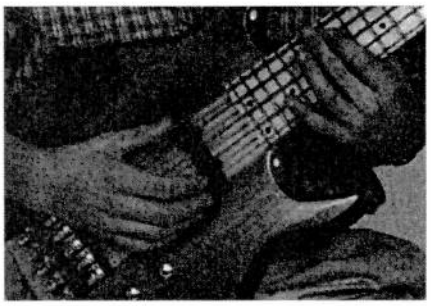


Fig. 3

The first step is to rest the side of your right hand on the strings just in front of the bridge (Fig. 1). Next, flatten out the hand so you can pluck the strings with your thumb with a downstroke (Fig. 2). This is the most common technique for walking quarter-notes; play Ex. 1 with your thumb, keeping the side of your hand against the strings close to the bridge. Each bass responds differently, so experiment with varying degrees of pressure on the strings.

If you play a 5- or 6-string bass, you can get an even fatter sound by using the *B* string and playing higher on the neck (Fig. 3)—you knew those notes would come in handy one day! The heavier string gets even closer to the sound you want—plus, you'll get more familiar with the territory in those higher positions.

The most common upright plucking technique is to use the side of the index finger to dig in, producing a full, meaty sound. After each note, you must reposition the index finger for the next attack; this creates a characteristic upright bass articulation on eighth-notes and triplets. The thumb downstroke technique is the perfect way to match this articulation on electric.

One advantage of right-hand muting vs. the foam mute is more control over note decay: The more pressure you put on the strings, the shorter the notes. On the other hand, the foam mute allows greater rhythmic articulation; you can play more-com-

Fig. 4

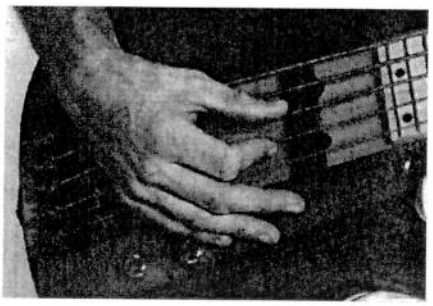


Fig. 5

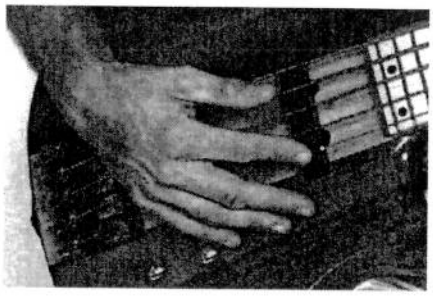
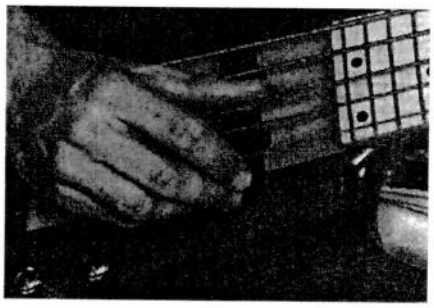


Fig. 6



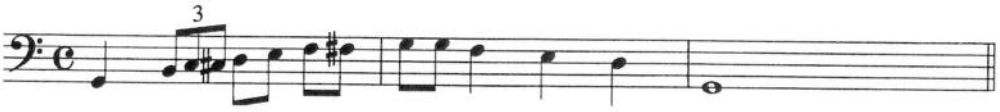
plex lines because your plucking-hand fingers can work in the usual manner. However, you do have some options with right-hand muting. For instance, you can use the thumb and index finger together. The thumb technique remains the same—downstrokes only—but you add the index finger to play additional notes with upstrokes (Fig. 4). This thumb-and-index technique works well when playing eighth-notes or triplets (Ex. 2).

Another approach uses only the index finger—not the thumb—in an upstroke motion (Fig. 5). This technique works for adding triplet "rakes" across three strings (Ex. 3). To get the classic rockabilly sound, put your thumb under the string a little and pull up slightly; the string will slap against the fingerboard, creating a slight click with each note. Practice playing Ex. 4 like this, and when Elvis comes out of hiding, you'll be ready for the gig!

Taking this idea a step further, you can add a muted thumb slap between each note, which simulates the acoustic slap-bass sound used in country, rockabilly, bluegrass, and early jazz (Fig. 6.) Ex. 5 puts this technique to good use.

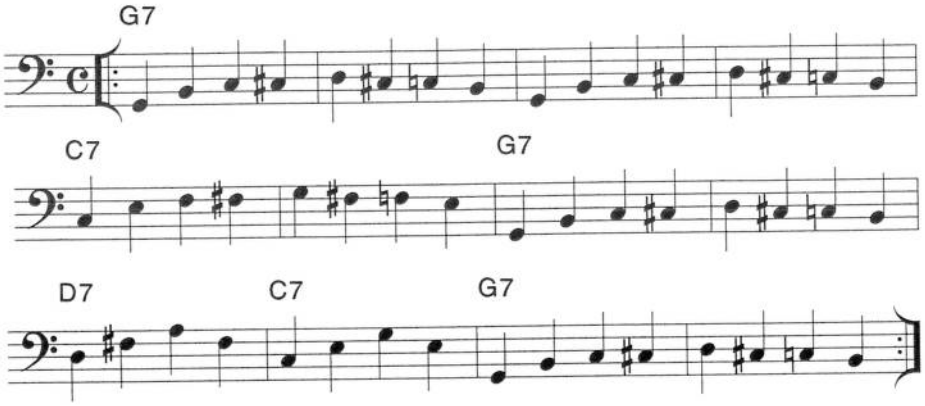
TRACK 37

Ex. 1

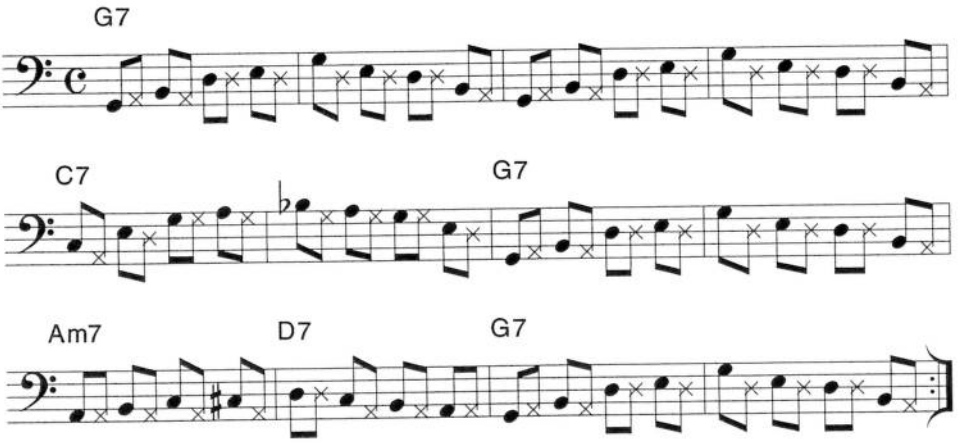


Ex. 2

Ex. 3



Ex. 4



Ex. 5

Thinking Upright

Beyond sound, the most important aspect of the thumb-and-mute technique is learning how to think like an upright player. If you already play acoustic bass, you have an obvious advantage—but even so, there are many styles of upright playing. Right-hand muting techniques work extremely well for swing-era music as well as early rock, R&B, and country & Western—essentially, all styles of upright playing before the use of steel strings and the fast two-finger articulation Scott LaFaro pioneered.

Learn to choose your notes as an upright player would. You're not only thinking about playing a different instrument—you're thinking about playing in a different time period. Remember upright is physically much harder to play than the electric. This was particularly true in the days before amps and steel strings, when the action had to be set high to get the sound to project. The effort required to produce each note forced bassists to play deliberately and simply.

Rather than being outmoded, this concept makes sense for all bass styles. Because the electric is physically so much easier to play, bassists feel compelled to play more notes than necessary, simply because it's both easy and gratifying. To simulate that old upright bass style, you must strip down your lines to essentials. You have to play the line that's most obvious—and stick with it.

For most applications, if you play the right notes the thumb-and-mute technique works better than upright. As we discussed in the previous chapter, it can be tricky to amplify the acoustic bass. And unless you dedicate an upright to old-style setup, with gut strings and high action, you can't get it to sound the way people expect for swing and jump blues. For those kinds of gigs people usually expect me to bring my upright, but I bring my electric instead and use the thumb-and-mute technique. The sound is exactly what they want to hear, and I never get any complaints.

Swing-Blues Lines

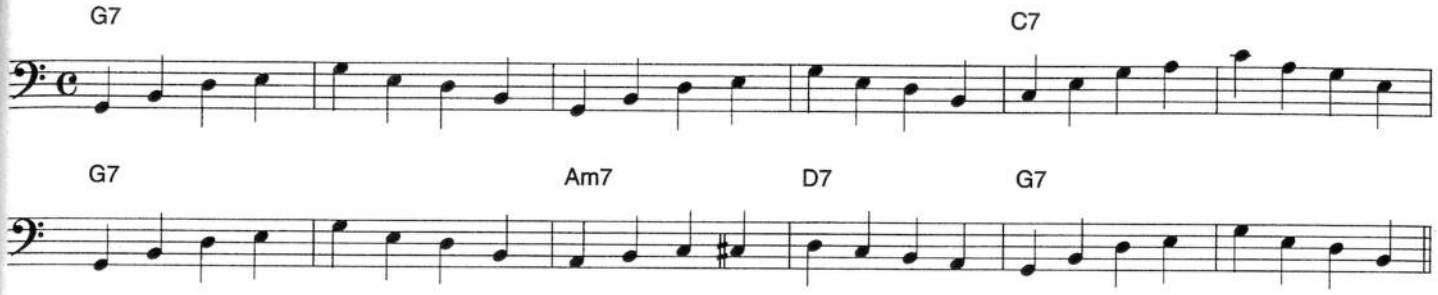
For swing-style 12-bar blues, Ex. 6 is the line you'll use most. It's nothing new, but if you make it groove, it can be the best thing you could possibly play. This line is the basis for most swing, blues, Western swing, early rock & roll, and boogie-woogie. Listen to old Chuck Berry recordings, and the next time you play "Johnny B. Goode," skip the eighth-notes and play this walking line. Joey Spampinato, NRBQ's great bassist, uses lines like this quite often; for a good taste of his playing, check out the Chuck Berry documentary film *Hail! Hail! Rock 'n' Roll.*

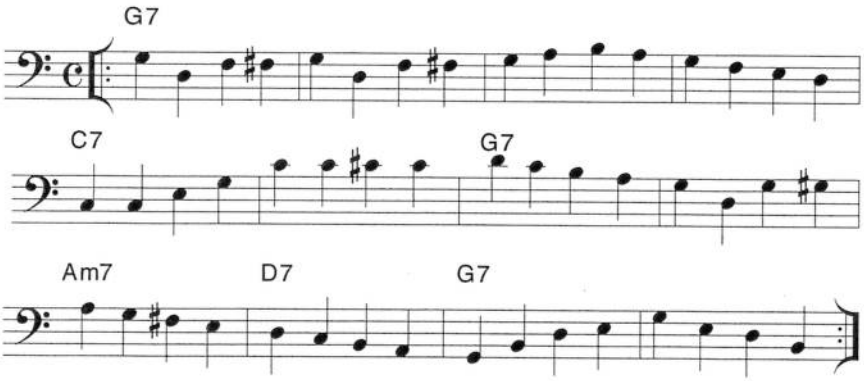
In a line like this the space *between* the pitches is essential. In other words, pay attention to note length. When he wrote about Western swing in his BASS PLAYER column, Nashville session great David Hungate aptly noted the "more traditional, percussive swing feel" has "some air between the notes."

Another way to give Ex. 6 more of an upright feel is to use only the index finger of your left hand. To take it a step further, stay on one string as much as possible. Swing players tended to walk up and down the same string; many early upright bassists started on washtub bass, and this had a big effect on how they approached the upright.

It's possible to get away from Ex. 6 and still sound authentic—just try to keep your line obvious, goal oriented, and authoritative. Ex. 7 shows another way to play over the same blues progression. Notice the repeated notes. Until the 1930s, bassists played mostly in a two feel, using only half-notes; when the swing era began, playing quarter-notes in four became standard—but the early bassists would often just repeat notes, essentially doubling up the two feel. As jazz progressed, the walking bass line developed more melodic complexity.

Ex. 6

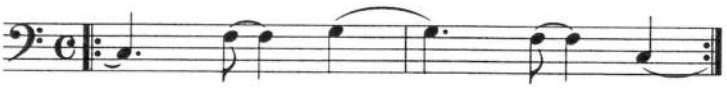




Ex. 7

Latin, Rap & Reggae

The thumb-and-mute technique works great in Latin music. For Ex. 8, go for the Ampeg Baby Bass sound.



Ex. 8

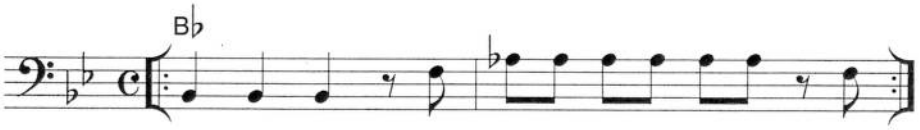
For synth-bass sounds, use the thumb and forefinger technique to play the eighth- and 16th-notes in Ex. 9. You can get different tones by palm pressure to control note decay.

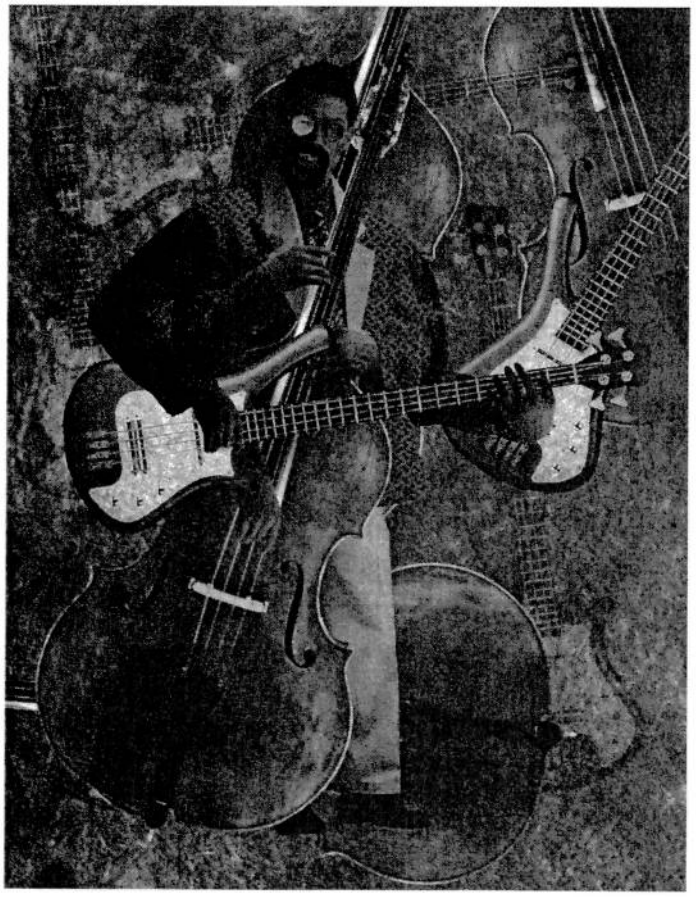
Ex. 9

For reggae's huge, fat bass sound, palm muting acts as a lowpass filter, giving you a perceived bass-frequency boost. Try Ex. 10 on your next Bob Marley set.

Right-hand muting can be a great addition to your sonic arsenal. It dramatically changes your tone without expensive devices, and when used skillfully can create the perfect sound for many situations. In addition to practicing this chapter's techniques and learning to use the new sounds, listen to recordings to get into the concepts. Soon you'll be able to pass the blindfold test: Is it upright...or is it the thumb thing?

Ex. 10





If you've got the sound and your band still isn't happy, give them "the look" too.

Chapter 11

Bass Chords

Photographs by Jean Hangarter

Why play chords on the electric bass? Aren't we supposed to just lay down the groove and support our fellow musicians in a subtle yet authoritative manner?

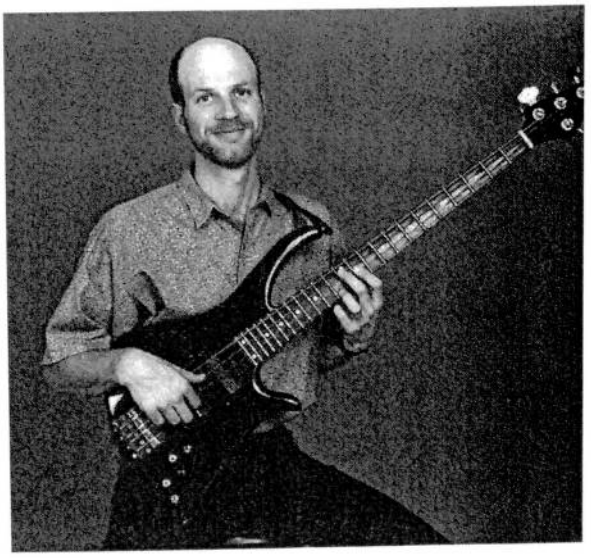
Of course we are—but don't forget we're playing bass *guitar*. Chords are a legitimate weapon in our musical arsenal. And, from a practical standpoint, learning to play chord voicings helps you develop harmonic awareness. Unless you also play a chordal instrument, you can be at a disadvantage when it comes to knowing what happens above the root. Playing chords will teach you the structures of different chord types and—equally important—help you learn to hear them.

To start out, we'll cover the most basic chord forms: three-note voicings that consist of the root, 3rd, and 7th. The 3rd and the 7th are also called *guide tones*; the 3rd determines whether a chord is major or minor, and the 7th is the major scale's natural 7th or a flatted 7th. Different guide-tone combinations create the chord voicings we'll use.

There are two basic shapes for each of these voicings. One shape has the root on the *E* string, the other has the root on the *A* string. Due to the bass's low register, these voicings generally sound best when played above the 10th fret. The voicings with the root on the *E* string will skip over the *A* string entirely.

Left-hand tips. To get all three notes to sound together, you need to bend your first and second knuckles and arch your fingers (Fig. 1). Play on the tips of your fingers rather than the pads. Your fingertips may get a little sore at first, but you'll soon develop the calluses you need.

Fig. 1



The author demonstrating proper chord-playing position. Keeping the bass high helps you get the correct left-hand angle. (Ed's custom bass was built by Wolf Ginandes of the Musical Instrument Service Center in Boston; 617-247-0525.)

Right-hand position. Playing closer to the bridge will help define each note's sound. To make the chords sound clear use only the bridge pickup, or use your tone controls to roll off low end.

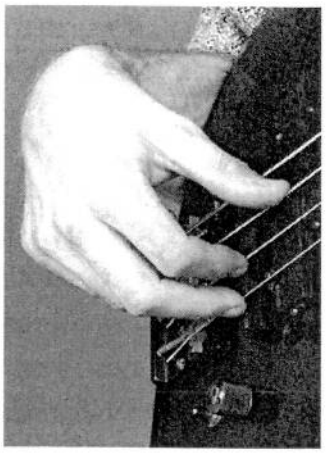


Fig. 2

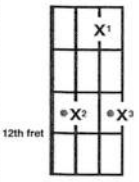
Right-hand tips. The cleanest right-hand approach is to use the thumb, index, and second fingers in a typical fingerpicking shape (Fig. 2). This lets you attack all three notes at the same time. Practice this technique and focus on making all the notes sound evenly balanced. You can also practice different fingerpicking combinations, such as thumb/1/2, thumb/2/1, 1/thumb/2, etc. Using all of these methods will help you develop a way to play chords and melody simultaneously.

Ex. 1 (with Charts 1–8) show six of the most common chord types, each built on an *A* root. Each chord is shown two ways: first with the root on the *E* string and then with the root on the *A* string. Ex. 2 (Charts 9–12) need all four notes to represent their true qualities, but we are using three-note voicings to make them playable. As a result, these "incomplete" voicings can double as other chords: the *Adim7* can also

TRACK 45

Ex. 1

1



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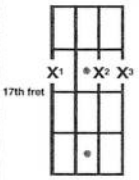

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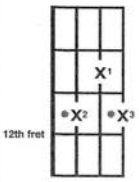

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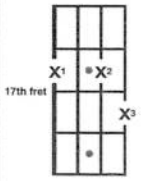

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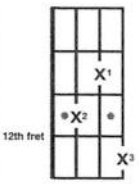

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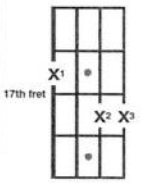
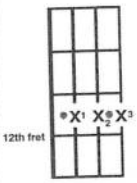


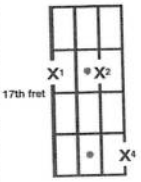
A7sus4

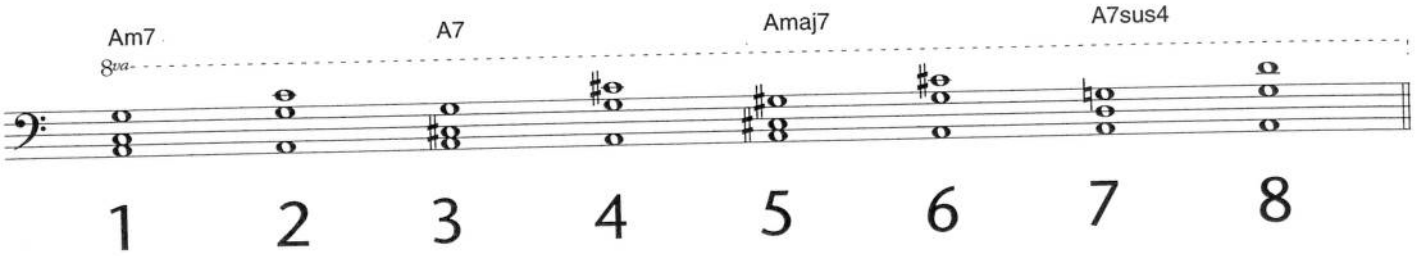
7


12th fret
X1 X2 X3

A7sus4

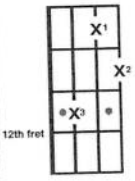
8

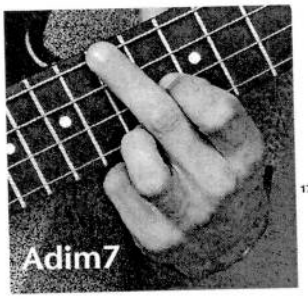

17th fret
X1 X2
X4


Am7
8va
A7
Amaj7
A7sus4
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

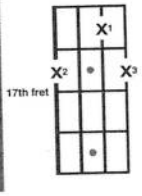
Adim7

9


12th fret
X1
X2
X3

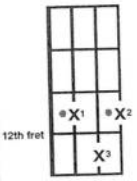

Adim7

10


17th fret
X1
X2
X3

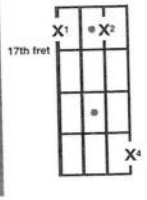
Am7♭5

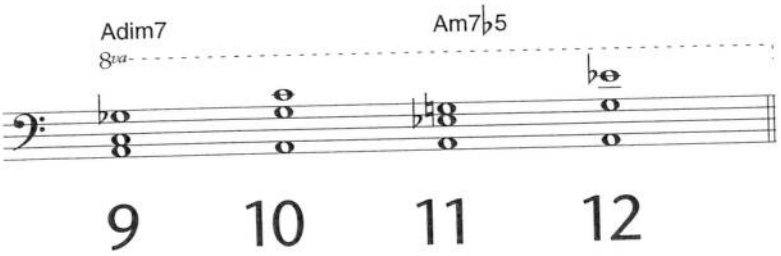
11


12th fret
X1
X2
X3

Am7♭5

12


17th fret
X1
X2
X4


Adim7
8va
Am7♭5
9 10 11 12

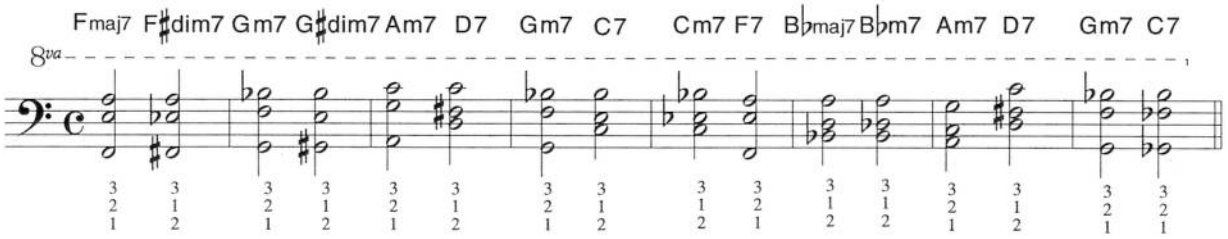
be used for *Am6*, and the *Am7♭5* can be used for *A7♯11*. Practice these chords and listen carefully to the sounds different chord types and voicings make. (Notice that the notes are marked *8va*, which means they are played one octave higher than written.)

These are the basic voicings of the most common chord types. Once they feel comfortable under your fingers, practice switching from one to the other. Turn your metronome or drum machine to a slow tempo and play each voicing for two beats before moving on to the next one.

Here's a helpful hint for switching chords: Notice that most of these voicings have the 3rd finger on the *G* string. When switching chords, use this finger as an anchor. You may have to move only the 1st and 2nd fingers to get to the next voicing. This will prove to be handy as you tackle Ex. 3, a common jazz chord progression. All the voicings are taken from the 12 shapes you've just learned, but you will now play some of them on different roots—which requires moving around. Remember to use your 3rd finger as an anchor—let it be a "sliding guide" for your left hand as you move through the progression. (The numbers under each chord are the fingerings.)

TRACK 46

Ex. 3



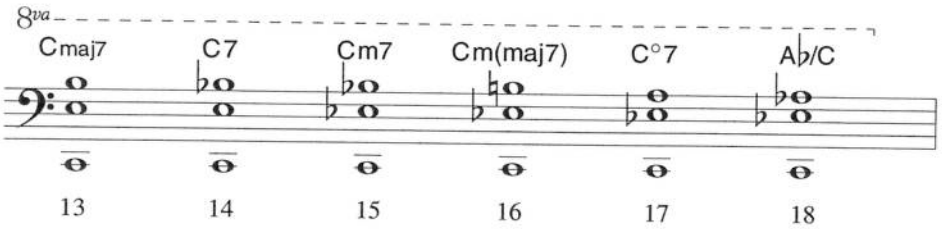
Play Ex. 3 slowly at first, and use *the metronome!* Once you feel comfortable with the mechanics of switching chords, pay attention to your sound. Try to balance each note so the chords sound clean and crisp. If your bass has two pickups, try using only the bridge pickup; this should make the chords sound less muddy. Picking close to the bridge will also clean up the sound. A little reverb is nice, too. On the CD I play through this progression six times; the first two passes are simply the chords in half-notes, as written. On the third and fourth pass I play them with a (hopefully) swinging rhythmic feel for more interest. The last two times I break up some of the chords with the right hand, and pick out some close-by melody notes to make it even more interesting. See what kind of variations you can find on your own.

5-string chords. The 5-string lets you find low notes above the 12th fret on the *B* string. These positions allow you to create chord voicings with a bigger spread between the root and guide tones. Ex. 4 shows you four new voicings with the root

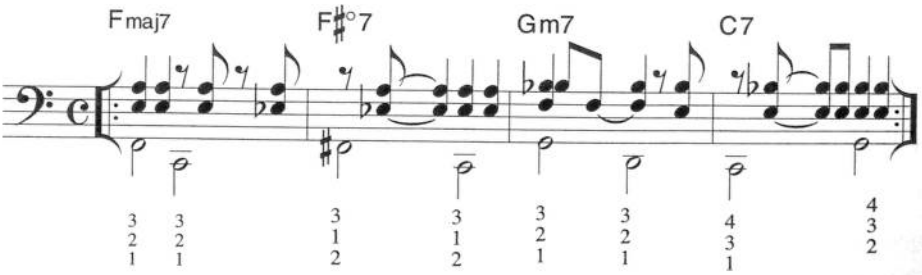
on the *B* string and the guide tones on the *D* and *G* strings. Because of the low register, we avoid using guide tones on the *A* and *E* strings.

When you have a chord with the root on the *E* string, you can find its lower 5th in the same fret on the *B* string. This lets you play chord patterns with alternating bass lines, a technique that works great for bossa nova. Ex. 5 is a bossa nova pattern with alternating bass.

Have fun with these voicings. They'll help you understand harmony and how it relates to the fingerboard, open up new doors to creative expression, annoy piano and guitar players by taking up their sonic space, and, of course, make you play three times better because you can now play three notes at a time instead of just one! Seriously, though—once you learn these chords well enough to take them out of the practice room, be careful how you apply them. They work great for solos, for backing up a melody line (try playing through a bossa nova with just sax, bass, and drums), or in a brave-new-world/go-for-the-throat venture like Primus. Just don't forget you still have to take care of business as a bass player.



Ex. 4



Ex. 5

On the CD

Track 1: Tuning note *G*

Chapter 2: Navigating a Chord Chart

Track 2: Ex. 2, typical chord chart

Chapter 3: Training Your Ears

Track 3: Ex. 2, diatonic intervals

Track 4: Ex. 3, major modes

Track 5: Ex. 4, diatonic arpeggios

Track 6: Ex. 5, chromatic intervals

Track 7: Ex. 6, *F* natural minor

Track 8: Ex. 7, melodic minor

Track 9: Ex. 8, melodic minor modes

Track 10: Ex. 9, melodic minor arpeggios

Track 11: Ex. 10, harmonic minor

Track 12: Ex. 11, harmonic minor modes

Track 13: Ex. 12, harmonic minor arpeggios

Track 14: Single-note dictation

Track 15: Two-note dictation

Track 16: Three-note dictation

Track 17: Four-note dictation

Track 18: Diad dictation

Track 19: Triad dictation

Track 20: 7th-chord dictation

Track 21: Triads, first inversion

Track 22: Triads, second inversion

Track 23: Triads, mixed inversions

Track 24: 7th-chord inversions

Track 25: Two-chord progressions

Track 26: Four-chord progressions

Chapter 4: Faking It

Track 27: Ex. 1, root motion

Track 28: Ex. 3, dominant resolutions

Track 29: Ex. 4, II-V-I

Track 30: Ex. 5, modulations

Chapter 5: Puttin' on the Tux

Track 31: Random modulations

Chapter 7: Freelancing

Track 32: Ex. 3, Style-O-Rama

Chapter 8: 5-String Fundamentals

Track 33: Ex. 2, *E* lick on 4-string & 5-string

Track 34: Ex. 5, I-IV-V line

Track 35: Ex. 6, *D* funk lick

Track 36: Ex. 7, slap line

Chapter 10: The Thumb Thing

Track 37: Examples 1, 2, 3, basic lines

Track 38: Ex. 4, rockabilly blues in *G*

Track 39: Ex. 5, slap blues in *G*

Track 40: Ex. 6, swing blues in *G*

Track 41: Ex. 7, alternate *G* blues

Track 42: Ex. 8, salsa

Track 43: Ex. 9, rap, R&B

Track 44: Ex. 10, reggae

Chapter 11: Bass Chords

Track 45: Ex. 1, basic chords; Ex. 2, *Adim7*, *Am7♭5*

Track 46: Ex. 3, chord progression

Track 47: Ex. 4, 5-string chords

Track 48: Ex. 5, 5-string bossa

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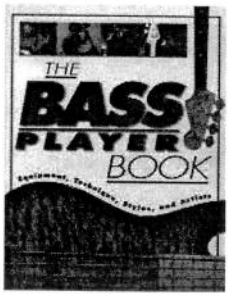

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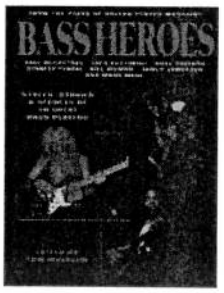

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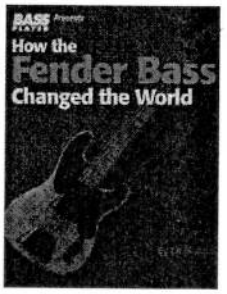

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ED FRIEDLAND is a contributing editor and columnist for *Bass Player*. A professional bassist for over 20 years, he has performed with Larry Coryell, Eddie Daniels, Johnny Adams, Robben Ford, Linda Hopkins, Martha & The Vandellas, and many other major artists. Friedland has written several books on bass technique, and has taught at Berklee College of Music.

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